

**Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Committee,
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade**

“FUTURE OF AL-QAEDA”

A Statement by

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Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Sherman and distinguished members of the Committee, it is an honor to testify before this Subcommittee on the Future of al Qaeda.

Mr. Chairman, we all greeted Osama bin Laden's death as a victory. I see it as an opportunity to advance a still active, difficult and necessary struggle against al Qaeda and its ideology. My testimony will outline what I think comes next for al Qaeda, both as a broad global movement and as a discrete terrorist organization.

Before I do, I think it is important to put recent events into a historic context. In the 1990s al Qaeda positioned itself as a platform for addressing a wide variety of local and global grievances. This gave it a degree of popular support. In 2003, for example, 72% of Palestinians, 59% of Indonesians, 56% of Jordanians, 15% of Turks, 19% of Lebanese, 45% of Nigerians, and 46% of Pakistanis polled by Pew expressed confidence in Osama bin Laden.

The U.S.-led war in Iraq helped al Qaeda sustain this momentum. Foreign fighters poured into Iraq and other conflict zones while al Qaeda's coffers swelled. Al Qaeda dominated the war of words with professional and timely media products that went unmatched or unanswered by the West. Osama bin Laden combined his vision of global Jihad with the local goals of like-minded terrorist groups around the world—some of which had ties to al Qaeda long before September 11.

It was likely bin Laden's hope that by the time he was killed or captured he would have helped establish and solidify a durable, self-sufficient movement. He was successful in this regard: those who fought or trained in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s are the spine of today's al Qaeda movement. Veterans of the more recent wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia have served as a new generation of credible fighters, and many of them now occupy leadership positions within al Qaeda or affiliated groups. These affiliates include al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, al Shabaab in Somalia, and al Qaeda in Iraq, among others.

Many of these groups were nourished with support by bin Laden. In certain cases, bin Laden's patronage led to public statements of backing for him, organizational name changes to reflect formal alliances, and operations against Western targets. Also appearing throughout the past several years were self-radicalized individuals who, though empowered by al Qaeda's narrative, were often inspired by leaders other than bin Laden. "Lone wolves" represent one of the most difficult facets of the terror threat.

So what are al Qaeda's prospects going forward? I believe the broader al Qaeda movement will survive the death of bin Laden for several reasons. First, al Qaeda's many affiliates are financially and operationally autonomous and their day-to-day activities will not be significantly

altered by bin Laden's removal. Second, al Qaeda's narrative that Islam is under attack is embedded and continues to resonate, even if its violent strategy does not. Third, existing conditions, such as the safe-haven in Pakistan and the chaos in Libya, offer lifelines for al Qaeda.

On this final point, I would like to offer you some very brief insights from the recent research in Africa. For the past month I conducted field work in six nations as part of an investigation into the current state and future prospects for al Qaeda and its associated movements. I visited Morocco, Mali, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania. More than forty interviews were conducted with journalists, academics, intelligence officials, diplomats, Muslim Brotherhood representatives, regional security officials, military officers, and Muslim community leaders. Later this summer I will visit South Asia and the Middle East for similar research.

One of our most interesting findings concerns Libya. Many of our interlocutors expressed concern that the conflict there could soon become an arena for defensive jihad. Such a development, our sources worried, would benefit al Qaeda-related groups and individuals. In particular, the situation in Libya could raise the fortunes of both al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as well as former members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, some of whom were allied with Osama bin Laden.

AQIM grew out of a preexisting Algerian jihadist group and now operates across the ungoverned parts of several countries in Africa's Sahel region. Although AQIM's membership and leadership is mostly Algerian, it has successfully recruited fighters from surrounding countries. One source of fighters has been Libya. According to a former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), 40 Libyans have joined AQIM over the past 18 months. These Libyan recruits aside, AQIM's networks already extended into southwest Libya, which positions it to trade on the ongoing chaos there.

The steady flow of people and weapons into and out of Libya, Algeria, and Chad suggests that AQIM is already taking advantage of this opportunity. My sources verified press reports that AQIM has acquired shoulder-fired SA-7 anti-aircraft missiles in Libya and exported them to Mali. Given al Qaeda's longstanding obsession with targeting commercial aircraft, the possibilities are obvious. Another source indicated that AQIM penetrated Libya after the fall of Tunisia in mid-January, and reportedly engaged in a firefight with Libyan police in the far southwest. With Libyan security forces battling rebels in the east, it is even more likely that AQIM will penetrate the western border.

Looking forward, the looming concern is that following the removal of Gadaffi—if it happens—the rebels will likely fail to establish firm and effective control of the country. This could rejuvenate AQIM. It is important to also keep in mind that AQIM has its eye on more than just

Libya. It is involved in all manner of illegal trafficking across the Sahel and West Africa. Additionally, AQIM recently offered material and moral support to Muslim militants in northern Nigeria, in particular to the group known as Boko Haram, in that movement's vicious sectarian battle with Christians.

There are other militants based in Libya which also stand to gain from the current crisis. In the eastern part of Libya one-time LIFG fighters are active in the rebellion against Gaddafi. Militancy in this area of the country is not a surprise. According to an analysis of captured documents by West Point's Combating Terrorism Center, the second highest number of foreign fighters in Iraq per capita came from eastern Libya—areas now under rebel control. Libyans have also played very senior roles in al Qaeda core, with Abu Yaha al-Libi being one of the most important ones today.

What's clear from our time on the ground is that Libya is gaining a lot of attention and can readily serve as a training ground for other militants drawn to this battlefield. With an inchoate democracy next door in Egypt and years of fragility ahead, instability and militant activity in Libya will threaten the promise that popular revolutions have offered for the region. And it is just this dynamic change sweeping the region that also presents a significant challenge to the al Qaeda movement.

The Arab Spring is a major blow to the al Qaeda movement. In what appears to be his last statement, bin Laden voiced support for the popular revolutions across the Middle East and North Africa. But he may have been accepting reality while hoping to take advantage of the situation in due time. The uprisings implicitly vetoed several pillars of bin Laden's ideology. In Egypt and Tunisia the protests succeeded where al Qaeda had failed, removing longstanding autocrats. The protesters goals were largely secular, their use of violence minimal, and their calls for democracy and a strong role for women anathema to al Qaeda. Only days ago I interviewed a young female member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt who enthusiastically supported democracy and human rights. I do not believe that she represents the bleak future that bin Laden hoped for.

In fact, I believe al Qaeda has little prospects for gaining traction in Egypt. Several factors make Egypt infertile ground: societal fatigue with Jihadists who had their moment in the 1970s and 1980s, and for the actions by the terrorist group Gamaa al-Islamiyah, which in 1997 killed over 50 tourists in Luxor--severely damaging the tourism industry. Furthermore, those Egyptians who remained committed to global jihad were assimilated by bin Laden's organization long ago.

Despite my optimism there are some risks in Egypt. One is the inevitability that millions of people will feel that their lot in life has not in fact improved since the change, and some of them may be susceptible to calls for violence against the new government. Do not forget that

52% of Egypt is under the age of 25. Sectarian tension between Muslims and Coptic Christians is a fault-line that could be exploited.

In East Africa, the threat from al Shabaab is of a different nature and of deep concern for the region. Al Shabaab is a complex group operating in a convoluted environment. It is the most recent expression of Islamist militancy in Somalia, which has endured despite the destruction of al-Ittihaad al-Islami and the Islamic Courts Union. Al Shabaab includes local Somalis, Somalis from the sizeable Diaspora, and foreign jihadists with ties to al Qaeda. With well-known cases of Somali-Americans traveling to the Horn of Africa to engage in fighting, this is an issue that has implications for US territory.

Given this composition, it is unsurprising that there are disputes within the organization over tactics and strategic goals. This confusing mosaic is further complicated by the divisive clan politics of Somalia. Assessing the current threat from al Shabaab is difficult—we heard many competing opinions throughout our interviews in both Nairobi and along East Africa's Swahili coast. On one hand the group is under severe strain. It is being confronted militarily along multiple fronts and its harsh administration has alienated sizable portions of Somalia's predominately Sufi population. On the other hand, the group has been able to successfully operate outside of Somalia, as evidenced by a 2010 bomb attack that killed dozens in Uganda, a nation that has supplied troops to the African Union Mission in Somalia currently engaging al Shabaab's forces.

In addition to the group's transnational reach, al Shabaab's ability to recruit transnationally is also of concern. The first American citizen to kill himself in a suicide bombing, Shirwa Ahmed, died in an attack attributed to al Shabaab. Another American, Omar Hamami, grew up in Alabama and now plays an important role within the organization. Ahmed and Hamami highlight the role that Americans and Europeans of Somali descent have already played within the organization. In the future, one is concerned about what may happen if Western volunteers return home with the skills and ideological conviction they obtained in Somalia.

Across Africa, al Qaeda and its associated movements have made significant inroads. But it also found places such as Somalia and, eventually, the Sudan to be difficult and inhospitable operating environments. Al Qaeda does not offer the only model for Islamist militants in Africa or in other areas where it is active.

The trend toward political participation by Islamists is also problematic for al Qaeda. As Peter Bergen points out, al Qaeda has not provided for peoples' material needs, while Islamist organizations that actually participate in political processes do—and do so under the banner of Islam. Other foreign terrorist organizations, such as Laskar-e-Taiba, Hamas, and Hezbollah have robust “above ground” welfare and political organs, which provides them with an advantage

over al Qaeda and its violence-only approach to change. Increasingly sophisticated terrorist organizations offering these goods and the ability to exert influence through elections has made al Qaeda's approach look outdated and incomplete. Al Qaeda must have taken note of this disadvantage, and perhaps those rising in the movement will seek to modify their approach.

Over the years militants in and out of al Qaeda have debated how best to achieve their Utopian vision of an Islamic caliphate. Arguments over the wisdom of the 9/11 attacks and the doctrine of Takfir in particular have roiled al Qaeda and focused criticism on bin Laden and his followers. Alternative strategic approaches may now come to the surface or get more air-time with the killing of al Qaeda's founder and leader—and we could very well see some examples in the months ahead. The death of Osama bin Laden marks a very important transition point for al Qaeda, the group. With bin Laden's passing, longstanding strategic debates within al Qaeda's senior leadership will likely intensify. This could take the group in a different direction.

Looking ahead and recommendations

Al Qaeda certainly will experience set-backs in the wake of bin Laden's death. Some remaining al Qaeda leaders will lay low in fear of what is revealed in the information gathered at bin Laden's compound. Just as drone attacks have injected risk into the calculations of terrorists, so too does the dramatic killing of Osama bin Laden and the data that was gathered on-site. Maintaining pressure at a moment of transition for al Qaeda leaders could yield gains. Any adjustments by parts of the movement could leave signatures useful to counterterrorism officials. Those who may now reevaluate their role in or commitment to the organization may be seen as liabilities by others. This could instigate internal discord and violence.

One caution in respect to the upcoming elections in Egypt and those likely to take place in other nascent Muslim-majority democracies is to avoid a repeat of Algeria in 1991. The Algerian government postponed the second round of elections following a strong showing by the Islamic Salvation Front and eventually dissolved the Parliament. What followed was years of brutal violence by all sides with more than 100,000 people being killed. If Islamist parties appear poised for a major victory in Egypt or elsewhere and were somehow prevented from gaining power, the results could be similarly catastrophic. At this point this seems unlikely, but this recent example merits a caution.

The death of bin Laden rightly prompts talk about his ongoing influence on the broader al Qaeda movement. But it will require much more time to sufficiently understand the nature of his influence and to then tailor our counterterrorism policies. Having said that, I think continuing what we have been doing, in large part, is right. Maintaining pressure on al Qaeda and associated groups will include drone strikes, denying safe haven, preventing the flow of

funding, countering online radicalization, supporting regional allies, and directly and thoroughly addressing the conditions that make violence so appealing for the young people who join the movement. But over time this approach will have to change as conditions and available intelligence dictate. Additional exploitation of the captured data will afford us a better understanding of bin Laden's influence on the wider network he began in Pakistan in 1989. In those intervening years, Osama bin Laden has succeeded in cultivating a far-flung, mature, and capable movement and an ideology that continues to resonate. Both will continue to do damage.

The movement will change or even splinter, but al Qaeda will remain relevant for a host of reasons. The intractable Israel-Palestine situation, Western influence and military forces in Muslim-majority countries, lethal partners and a safe haven in nuclear-armed Pakistan, and a long list of underlying conditions can all facilitate recruitment and operations. With so many unknowns, the US and its allies will have to maintain pressure on al Qaeda and its associated movements for the foreseeable future. Pursuing policies based on the notion that Osama bin Laden's death signals the end for al Qaeda and its affiliated groups would be a premature, unwise, and dangerous position to take at this time.